

# Bank Street



bank street college of education 610 west 112th street new york, ny 10025-1898 tel: 212-875-4400 web site: [www.bankstreet.edu](http://www.bankstreet.edu)



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# Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification

preface

jonathan g. silin

jon snyder

miranda barry

sarah samuels

ariel sacks

allen ellenzweig



bank street college of education

Bank Street College of Education, founded in 1916, is a recognized leader in early childhood, childhood, and adolescent development and education; a pioneer in improving the quality of classroom education; and a national advocate for children and families.

The mission of Bank Street College is to improve the education of children and their teachers by applying to the educational process all available knowledge about learning and growth, and by connecting teaching and learning meaningfully to the outside world. In so doing, we seek to strengthen not only individuals, but the community as well, including family, school, and the larger society in which adults and children, in all their diversity, interact and learn. We see in education the opportunity to build a better society.

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## PREFACE

**jonathan g. silin**

The pressing needs of many school districts—more than one million veteran teachers are nearing retirement and more than two million new teachers will be needed by the end of the next decade—make innovation in teacher preparation inevitable. This demand, combined with the high costs of many traditional certification programs and the desire for a more diversified workforce, has already led to a broad range of efforts to attract highly qualified candidates to a profession which loses close to 50% of its new members in their first five years. We must draw large number of people into the field AND provide them with good reasons to stay. Whether we approve or not, alternative routes to teacher preparation are clearly here to stay.

A growing research literature on non-traditional pathways suggests the complexity of the task ahead. *Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification* is our report from the front lines. We wanted to offer new teachers the opportunity to tell their own stories in their own words. Jon Snyder sets the scene with an insightful and provocative essay that identifies the key issues from a public policy perspective. While he has serious reservations about many alternative programs, he also has been instrumental in developing the Partnership for Quality, a collaboration between schools in the South Bronx and Bank Street College. This alternative program only allows candidates to become teachers of record after establishing the capacity to work successfully with children. In addition, candidates participate in on-going mentoring with experienced teachers in schools where they and the entire staff receive support from the College.

The essays which follow Snyder—three by first-time authors—document the experiences of four novice teachers. Allen Ellenzweig and Miranda Barry are both career changers who entered the New York City Teaching Fellows Program (NYCTF) in their early 50s. Sarah Samuels and Ariel Sacks, two younger women, went directly from undergraduate work into the classroom. Samuels joined Teach for America; Ariel Sacks began teaching without any formal supports, left, and

eventually came to Bank Street and the Partnership for Quality. In their compelling first person narratives all of these authors confirm Snyder's emphasis on programs that provide effective initial preparation and offer sustained mentoring. Both Samuels and Sacks demonstrate the powerful outcomes possible when a strong commitment to social justice combines with conscientious mentoring, an understanding of the importance of collaboration, and the skills that can transform an educational vision into a daily reality. Not surprisingly, Samuels and Sacks remain in the classroom today. After leaving the NYCTF Barry completed a traditional certification program and works in educational television, while Ellenzweig has left the field.

Five themes weave their way through these personal essays and remind us of the spectrum of fundamental issues that frame life in schools.

*Collaboration and Isolation.* Samuels shows how collaboration with families, colleagues, and funders helped her to survive and thrive as a new teacher. She knew from the start that she could not go it alone and sought opportunities at every turn to work with others. By contrast, Barry, Ellenzweig and Sacks vividly portray the isolation that so many teachers experience and the toll that it takes on them and their students.

*Educational Vision and Pedagogical Skills.* All of the authors began with a strong commitment to social justice and to offering others the benefits of their own educations. Such commitments sustained Barry, Sacks and Samuels through the process of certification even when this meant changing programs and increased expense. The essays emphasize that a vision while necessary to becoming an engaged teacher must be supported by the knowledge and skills that can translate it into smaller daily practices that make for vibrant, democratic communities.

*Theory and Practice.* Barry, Sacks and Samuels eventually found programs that offered a match between the theories they were being taught and the practices needed to survive in difficult settings. Peer support and wise mentoring form the critical bridge for these three authors. For Barry and Ellenzweig the NYCTF summer and fall courses had little bearing on the realities they faced in their classrooms and schools.

*Leadership and Silence.* These essays demonstrate the importance of strong, positive leadership through its absence rather than presence. The authors had few experiences of the consistent, reliable structure that teachers and students need to learn and grow. These essays are filled with silences, miscommunications and sudden actions that often leave new teachers at sea and sometimes without jobs

*Resources and Barren Landscapes.* All of our authors give voice to the frustrations of working in schools that lack basic material resources—books, paper, copy machines—let alone the human resources to support teachers and learners. At the same time they also provide inspiring examples of creative professionals determined to make their classrooms places where children feel safe and can learn.

While offering distressing pictures of some alternative route programs, these essays also shed light on the elements that make schools work and allow new teachers to learn their craft: collaboration among peers and between professionals and families; vision informed by appropriate practices; theory offering insight into the lived realities of students and teachers; leadership that creates reliable, safe environments; rich resources. If, as Snyder suggests, becoming a great educator is a career-long process, than we must work to insure that in their first years new teachers have the kinds of educative experiences they will want to replicate for students in their own classrooms.

Jonathan Silin, Editor  
Occasional Papers

## **ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION AND ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS: A PERSONAL TAKE ON A CORE POLICY DILEMA**

**jon snyder**

In the spring of 2001, I interviewed for the position of dean of the Graduate School at Bank Street College of Education. After a packed 10-hour day of interviews and presentations, I met with the president of the college, Dr. Kappner. There had been a fire in the building two days before, and the smoke that was still in the air caused my eyes to burn and tear. That, along with my increasing confidence and exhaustion, lowered my internal censoring devices, and I was a bit more frank than politic in my responses to her questions.

She asked for my opinion on rapid-entry alternate teacher certification routes. I said that I thought they were bad policy and bad for children. I went on to say that Bank Street, because its name meant something in the world, had an ethical responsibility both not to participate in them and to take a public stand against them. I then learned from her response that Bank Street not only already had a partnership with Teach for America, but also was initiating a partnership with the New York City Department of Education to train Teaching Fellows. At that point I may have said “oh,” or I may have just gone silent.

When I returned to my hotel room that night, I phoned my son and told him I didn’t think we would be moving to New York.

I was wrong. President Kappner did offer me the position, and I accepted. The past six years as dean, have forced me to think, and continually rethink, my understandings and doubts regarding rapid entry alternate routes.

### **Alternative Certification vs. Alternative Pathways**

I believe that the fundamental function of initial certification of teachers is the protection of the children whose guardians are compelled by law to send them to school. It is not to ensure that everyone who receives that credential is a great teacher. That is a longer, much more complex undertaking, requiring supportive contributions from many more players in many more contexts than initial certifi-

cation provides. Becoming a great teacher involves turning ideals into realities and is a lifetime's work. The teacher who is talented, well prepared, well supported, and lucky gets better with experience. An entire preservice professional education provides an introduction to enacting core values as pedagogy. The preservice experience, no matter how exceptional, serves only as the beginning. Initial certification, on the other hand, works to assure a baseline of the minimal knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions required for the education of children.

Different minimal knowledge bases, skills, practices, and dispositions are necessary for teaching different groups of students or achieving particular educational goals, so it makes sense to require a different certification for each. For instance, the minimal requirements for teaching mathematics to students aged 14–18 differ from those needed to teach all subjects to students aged 5–12. Similarly, there are particular requirements for teaching English language learners (as opposed to native English speakers) and for educating atypically (as opposed to typically) developing children. Thus, states have many different certifications because the minimal protective floor for each varies according to the developmental status of the students and the content for which a certification recipient will be responsible.

Unless similar children require different levels of protection, alternate certifications lose their significance. More specifically, why would one typically developing eight-year-old require a different set of protections than another typically developing eight-year-old? Who needs more protection, and who needs less? Given that the huge majority of rapid-entry alternatively certified teachers work with children living in poverty, alternative certification does not pass the test of either common sense or basic fairness.

People, however, pursue entry into the teaching profession at different phases of their lives and with different constellations of knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions. To require each prospective teacher to meet the basic requirements in precisely the same manner ignores human nature, the varying career paths of prospective teachers, and the labor market. This makes the case for offering multiple alternate pathways to meet the minimal protective floor provided by initial certification.

For instance, some proponents of alternate certification ask what would happen if Albert Einstein decided to become a high school physics teacher? Let us pretend for a moment that there are many Einsteins, and that several of them wish to become teachers, and that this would help to meet a small percentage of the overall need for high school physics teachers. Clearly there would be little value in these Einsteins taking the physics courses that would generally be required of people pursuing careers as high school physics teachers. On the other hand, because children's interests are best served when educators have some basic understanding of how children learn and develop, the Einsteins would still have to study those subjects in order to be prepared to teach.

A more realistic concern is the case of college graduates who have succeeded in other careers and then decide that they wish to become teachers. To require them to complete a full undergraduate initial certification program not only denigrates what they already know and have accomplished, but also seriously reduces the likelihood that they will in fact become teachers. Let's also assume that some of these career changers have families, along with personal and financial responsibilities to them. Both they and their families require and deserve flexibility, recognition of their life experiences, and a quicker entry into a paid position as a teacher of record. In short, the varying strengths, interests, and needs of adult learners and the hiring needs of schools demand multiple pathways to meet initial credentialing requirements.

### **The Core Policy Question and Dilemma**

If the fundamental purpose of initial certification is the protection of children, the core question, regardless of the pathway into the profession, is: at what point should an individual become a teacher of record? When is it safe to entrust a year of a child's educational life—a year that, once over, cannot be rolled back and started again as if it never happened—to a teacher? Some would argue that such questions can only be answered by placing that teacher in the classroom and seeing how he or she does—in other words, that there is no way to tell how good a teacher someone is until that person actually begins to teach. Those who make such an argument often also believe that all preservice teacher education is a waste of time.

In fact, both the experience of teachers and research evidence<sup>1</sup> refute those two premises; and in any case, that argument does not satisfactorily address the core question. The “let the buyer beware” business orientation underlying that argument not only suggests that it is acceptable for a child to have an unprepared teacher, but also implies that it is the child’s fault for buying a bad product (even though the child, after all, is compelled to attend school). But while teachers can be dismissed after a year or two, children cannot erase the years of poor education they receive when they have minimally accomplished teachers. Thus, the net result of this type of thinking dismantles the social benefits of public education. Free public education for all is a primary function of each and every one of the 50 states, both for the benefit of the individual student and because our democracy, our economic well-being, and our way of life depend upon an educated populace. We all have a responsibility and a stake in assuring that all our children have the teachers they deserve and that the well-being of our communities requires.

Analyzing this argument thus reveals an essential element of an ethical response to the core question of the protection of children. When we consider what happens when someone becomes a teacher of record, it is clear that a preservice professional preparation program must work with its candidates once they become teachers of record both to continue to help them grow into that role and to assure itself—and, more importantly, students and families—that it has met its responsibility to protect children.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the line of research developed by Darling-Hammond and colleagues ([www.NCTAF.org](http://www.NCTAF.org)), who compared the achievement test scores of students of Teach for America (TFA) members with the scores of students of fully credentialed teachers. They found that students of fully certified teachers performed better than TFA members’ students (who, however, scored as well or better than those of other non-fully certified teachers). See also the work of Wyckoff and colleagues ([www.teacherpolicyresearch.org](http://www.teacherpolicyresearch.org)), who found that the students of fully certified first-year teachers performed better on standardized achievement tests than the students of either Teaching Fellows or TFA members did. Important to consider, however, is that their research also suggests that after TFA candidates and Teaching Fellows had completed certification requirements and were in their third year of teaching, their students scored higher than those of “traditionally” certified teachers. Combined, these findings make a strong argument for both traditional and alternate credentialing pathways.

Nearly all states have created rapid-entry alternate certification models designed to ensure that there are enough teachers to staff all their schools. Most states, to their credit, have tempered their rush to fill classrooms with policies that maintain their prime directive to protect the children. This is usually done in two ways: (a) assuring some level of preservice preparation, including opportunities to work with students under the guidance of experienced teachers and teacher educators; and (b) requiring mentoring and continued professional education for alternate pathway candidates until they fully meet the basic requirements of initial certification.

When teacher education programs and schools work together, these alternate pathways have the potential to protect children while simultaneously providing the flexibility appropriate for adult learners. New Haven, California, for instance, in partnership with CSU-Hayward, offers a secondary teacher education program organized around the knowledge, skills, and practices required for initial certification in the state of California. When both the teacher educators and the New Haven school agree that candidates in the program have developed sufficiently to be considered qualified to work with children, the school hires them to teach one or two periods as teachers of record; until they have completed the requirements for initial certification, the candidates spend the remaining periods working with other teachers.

Another example of such a partnership is Bank Street College's work with three schools in the South Bronx in an early childhood and/or childhood teacher education program. In this model, Bank Street candidates who are halfway through an initial certification program can be hired by schools as lead teachers. While those teachers complete the requirements for initial certification, the three schools involved in the project work with the candidates and the college to provide a reduced work load and additional on-site mentoring.

In both the New Haven and Bank Street models, alternate pathway candidates: (a) become classroom teachers only after establishing the capacity to work successfully with students; (b) do not immediately assume full teaching responsibilities; and (c) work in supportive schools that arrange release time for experienced teachers to mentor them. In addition, the colleges involved also provide supports to the schools and the candidates.

In an ideal world, all children's educational rights are protected by having teachers who meet a minimal protective floor for certification and who have supports to continue to improve once they become teachers of record. In an ideal world, all teacher education providers would work with the schools that hire their candidates to assure the protection of children while providing the flexibility required to accommodate adult learners and meet the staffing needs of districts. Reality, however, dictates a different set of circumstances. States do allow, and districts do hire, teachers who have not met the minimal protective floor for certification to work as teachers of record. Some teacher education providers do not work with or in the schools that hire their candidates; in those cases, alternate route entrants into the classroom are left without the supports they require to meet their responsibilities as beginning teachers.

This is, in simplest terms, bad public policy. It leaves children unprotected. It exacerbates teacher shortages by creating a revolving door of well-meaning but underprepared and undersupported beginning teachers. It allows policy makers, teacher education providers, and schools to avoid responsibility for making the kinds of changes needed to ensure that all children have qualified teachers. Meanwhile, those underprepared and undersupported beginning teachers are currently working with children. What, then, is the right thing to do? Fight the flawed policies and inadequate practices rather than participate in them? Or participate and work to reduce the damage done by the policies and practices?

Once doing the right thing moves from abstraction to human affairs, it blurs the line between absolute right and absolute wrong. At times there are strong, principled values on both sides of that line. Helping the teachers working with children right now is at the heart of Bank Street's mission and should be part of a core commitment of all professional educators. Standing up for the best interests of children and advocating for good public policy is equally at the heart of Bank Street's mission and should also be a core commitment of all professional educators.

The murkiness and the conflict of principled values do not dictate that one withdraw from the confusing terrain, ignoring its complexity and succumbing to advocating a single simplistic response. Befuddling as human affairs inevitably are,

our responsibility is to remain engaged intellectually and ethically, to continue to do the best we can in the moment, and to vigorously and vigilantly enact our personal and professional commitments to protect and serve children in the multiple environments in which we pursue our calling.

### **An Evolving Perspective**

My personal stance on this inherent ethical dilemma continues to evolve. For nine years I served as director of Teacher Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara. The two local districts there did not have a shortage of initially certified teachers. In fact, they were able to hire our best graduates each year, as there were many fewer openings than graduates who wanted to teach in the Santa Barbara area. At that time I was also involved in several national education policy research projects and, as a member of California's Commission on Teacher Credentialing, worked on state-level education policy issues. Not surprisingly, given my experience of the local teacher labor market and my state/national research focus, I wrote and acted vociferously in opposition to what I derisively called "instant teacher" programs.

In the summer of 2001, we moved to New York City and I became dean of the Graduate School at Bank Street College of Education. When I arrived, New York City was filling its teaching vacancies with candidates from its homegrown Teaching Fellows Program and with Teach For America (TFA) participants. At that time, Bank Street's involvement with rapid-entry alternate teacher certification routes consisted in enrolling Fellows and TFA members, once they had begun working as teachers of record, as students in our regular teacher education programs. While both the Teaching Fellows and TFA programs provided some preparation for their participants before they became lead teachers, neither offered the kind of safeguards or ongoing supports provided by the New Haven and Bank Street models described above. Thus, my initial response was to argue that we should not be involved with them. Instead, we should drop out of those partnerships and develop the kind of model we eventually did.

As dean, I am responsible for the well-being of the Graduate School, and so financial concerns play a role in my thinking. Bank Street College is a private

nonprofit institution that receives no state funding; tuition dollars must generate the resources required to run its programs. After enrolling one cohort, Bank Street discontinued its participation in the city's Teaching Fellows Program for financial reasons. It certainly made no sense to put Bank Street at financial risk in support of bad public policy. TFA, however, approved a plan that provided Bank Street with the funds required to work with their members. Thus, there was no financial reason for Bank Street not to work in partnership with TFA.

More important than finances, however, were the testimonials of TFA candidates whom I saw working so tirelessly and idealistically to support the growth and development of the children in their care. They reported, and our faculty advisors who worked with them corroborated, that they were better prepared to work with children because of their training at the college. In fact, they reported that they would have left the classroom had it not been for the professional and personal support they received from Bank Street faculty and from their colleagues. That support included the Bank Street advisement model and its focus on understanding children, along with instructors who were exemplary teachers. It was hard work, but together they were helping to protect and educate children. After several years, we knew that the professional education that Bank Street provided TFA members was making a difference: they were staying in the classroom after the required two-year period at much higher rates than other TFA participants in both the state of New York and nationally.

Bank Street is working to expand the "halfway" model now used in partnership with three schools in the Bronx. But at the same time, we will also continue to work with TFA members. However, I remain personally and professionally uncomfortable with that decision—though certainly not with TFA core members or others who want to provide quality instruction to children who are ignored and underserved in the current system. Rather, my discomfort revolves around Bank Street's relationship with bad public policy. On the one hand, Bank Street is helping alternate route certification teachers do a better job with children right now. Because the college's graduates' retention rate is high, our work appears to be successful. Perhaps Bank Street College is even helping the band aid to stick, thereby decreasing the revolving door of well-meaning but underprepared and

undersupported individuals who enter teaching via the alternate certification route. On the other hand, the college's continued participation helps maintain a policy that in the long run is harmful to children. Is the benefit achieved by making bad public policy less bad greater than the harm done by enabling the continuation of that policy? How do institutions like Bank Street balance the immediate needs of children in the classrooms of underprepared and undersupported teachers with the longer-term needs of all the children in the years to come?

As long as the policy question remains focused solely on preservice teacher education, and as long as that question continues to be framed in terms of rapid-entry alternative versus traditional certification pathways, the ethical dilemma described in this paper will remain. One way out of the conundrum can be found in the new alternative pathways described above and in such routes as the urban teacher residencies in Boston, Chicago, and Denver. In all of these instances, in different ways and with differing degrees of success, partners without a history of successful collaboration are coming together to work simultaneously on teacher recruitment, preparation, and induction, ongoing professional development, and school redesign. In short, all the institutions that share the responsibility for the education of our children must work together to make certain that:

- Strong candidates are recruited into programs that adequately prepare them to begin teaching;
- Teachers receive numerous effective opportunities for continuing to refine their practices and to use their knowledge and skills to support other teachers; and
- Schools are organized in such a manner that teachers can maximize their potential as educators, in turn allowing their students to maximize their potential as learners.

We must come together to generate solutions to all three of those issues or remain trapped within the ethical dilemma of existing teaching certification policy. Doing so will not be easy, as it will require a radical reconfiguration of the rules, roles, and relationships within and among schools, districts, unions, universities, states, and the federal government. But failure is not an option; our children's future and the communities they will create depend upon our succeeding.

**"I HOPE THIS WILL BE A GOOD YEAR FOR ME..."**  
**A CAREER-CHANGER STUMBLES ON THE FAST TRACK TO TEACHING**

**miranda barry**

Claude Brown, the author of *Manchild in the Promised Land*, died on February 2, 2002. A few days later, when I saw his obituary in *The New York Times*, I recalled the experience of reading *Manchild* for the first time. This book, along with Richard Wright's *Native Son* and the civil rights and anti-war movements that I participated in during my college years, profoundly affected my values and my sense of purpose in life. After college, I was attracted to a career in film and television because I believed the media could challenge people's habits of mind through promoting empathy with others. At American Playhouse, I was able to adapt *Native Son* and support many other independent films that explored social and ethnic minority cultures in America. Later, as a producer of *Ghostwriter*, I was able to successfully promote literacy strategies while entertaining thousands of school-age children. But in 2002 the media world was changing; it seemed less and less possible to get funding for this type of programming.

Brown's obituary highlighted his relationship with a teacher, Stuart Papanek, who not only taught Brown, but also introduced him to the editor who commissioned *Manchild*. Without Papanek, I reasoned, Brown would not have found a publisher for *Manchild in the Promised Land*; in fact, he probably would not even have written it.

On the page facing the obituary was an ad for the New York City Teaching Fellows: "You still remember your first-grade teacher's name. Who will remember yours?" I was hooked.

People advised me against becoming a Teaching Fellow. One member of the Bank Street faculty was scathing, insisting that the training was inadequate, I was naïve, and I might do more harm than good. My partner, who grew up in inner-city schools in Philadelphia, said, "Those children won't even understand you when you talk to them!" But my longing to make a difference closed my mind to their wisdom. The Teaching Fellows program looked like a chance for me to

step out of my comfort zone and *do* something, to put my concern for children to work in their real lives. I knew it would be hard, but after September 11, and having turned fifty, I needed to feel that I was doing something valuable.

In the spring of 2002, over 15,000 New Yorkers applied for posts in the Teaching Fellows program. Many of us, after September 11, wanted to show faith in the future by serving children. I was thrilled to be among the 2,000 chosen.

Our first step was a job fair. The first assistant principal I met hired me. Then, once we were attached to a district, we were assigned to a university for course work and divided into small groups with a teacher-mentor who would guide us through the seven-week training.

Despite the nine-hour days followed by homework, I loved being back in school. I loved learning from my peers. I loved reading textbooks and writing research papers. I especially loved practice teaching, working in a summer classroom with 12 fifth graders and an experienced teacher. It was fun.

We Fellows-in-training took two literacy classes and a child development course at Fordham; in UFT workshops at district headquarters we learned “ice-breakers” and discussed arranging classroom furniture. Our preparation seemed haphazard and disorganized, but I figured we’d eventually be given a curriculum that would pull the pieces together. When we received the New York City standards in ELA, math, and social studies, I was astonished to see how little guidance they offered on what we were to teach or how we were to teach it. There was only one session on classroom management offered, and it was optional. It was scheduled for the vacation week after the end of our training period, and I’d already bought a non-refundable plane ticket. Few Fellows attended.

There was a celebration of the end of our training at the Bronx Zoo. We took the licensing exam. Because I passed the exam on the first try, I was placed as a head teacher in a classroom of 35 fifth graders. I had never seen the textbooks I’d be using; I didn’t even know what grade I would be teaching until a week before classes started.

The school was in a relatively new building that covered a whole block in the Parkchester section of the Bronx, a diverse and economically mixed neighborhood. Students spoke 10 different home languages. Classrooms were large, with

big windows. There were two copy machines for 60 teachers and about 2,000 children, grades K-6. We had to supply our own paper. I spent as much as \$50 a day at Kinko's, where I'd stop at 6:00 a.m. on my way to school. My wonderful partner Xeroxed mountains of content for me, which was necessary because I did not have a full set of any of the textbooks I was supposed to use. I carried books and papers to school in a suitcase on wheels, which weighed a ton as I hauled it up to the fourth floor. New teachers did not get keys to the elevator.

We had been told that the administration would take note of the attractiveness of our rooms, but by the time school started in September, not one of the administrators who had hired me in June was still at the school. Trainers also advised us not to smile until Halloween, or better yet, Thanksgiving. The day before school started, my neighboring teacher remarked, "You are in for a shock." When I asked why, he shrugged, paused as if he was considering what to say to someone as clueless as I, and offered, "Some of these students are really ... angry."

I spent the week before school scrubbing grime out of the corners of the room and decorating it with posters to welcome the "All Star Class." I planned to explain that children who did their best to learn all week would see their names on the stage of the All Star Class poster, and become eligible for awards and prizes. I marked each seat with a child's name in a big red star. I put pencil boxes on the tables with crayons, scissors, Scotch tape, glue sticks and correction fluid. I posted a list of classroom jobs and asked students to write a letter telling which one they wanted and why they felt they were qualified for it. I invented Multiplication Volleyball, a game played with an aluminum foil ball, to energize students and smooth the transition between the literacy period and math.

The children seemed bewildered by the All-Star scheme, but open to it. One quiet and thoughtful boy said, his eyelids halfway lowered, "I hope this is going to be a good year for me." I hoped so too.

The pencil boxes had to be put away within an hour because children were painting themselves, each other, and the furniture with correction fluid. By the middle of the second week, I had laryngitis from talking loud enough to be heard over the classroom noise. By the third week, I was not able to keep the students quiet and focused from 8:20 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., when we had lunch. Our Fordham

course that semester was on classroom management, but when I brought my troubles to the professor she told me that we wouldn't be covering that topic until November.

The assistant principal took an interest in my class. At first, when she observed my teaching, she said I was "a natural" and would catch on quickly, but then friction began to develop. She said that classroom jobs should be rewards for good behavior and that too many students were acting up to justify having such a program. She asked me to send a letter home demanding that all the parents come to school for a meeting about discipline. I didn't think things were bad enough to warrant that, so I didn't follow through. She told me that the transition game, like the jobs, should be withheld because the students were noisy when they played it, but I felt that the release of tension and chance to move around were essential if the children were going to stay focused for more than four hours. I was assigned a mentor in the school, a tiny, ancient woman who had taught first and second grade for many years. One day she gave a lesson in which she got my whole class mooing. They laughed about her for a week. The school sent in a special education teacher to coteach the literacy period with me. She shouted at the students and insulted and humiliated them. Though she was kind to me outside the classroom, I could not imitate her approach—it just wasn't in me.

But I wasn't ready to give up yet.

Our class was supposed to post a bulletin board in the hallway, and I wanted the students to have something to display that they were proud of, so I started a geography project. Pairs of students selected U.S. states by pulling jigsaw puzzle pieces out of a bag, traced them, and researched their capitals, geography, and industries. It seemed to go well, and my hopes began to rise a little.

Some students couldn't stay seated. Regina, for example, would be calm and attentive one day, but wriggle in her chair the next, talking back and hitting others. Her guardian told me that her mother had had "some problems with drugs" during pregnancy. Once when Regina was especially distracted, I asked her to come sit at a desk near me in the front of the room. She seemed to like this special place and did not want to leave it at the end of the day. I let her stay there. The next time she felt restless, she went to the back of the classroom and straight-

ened out the library. I thought this was an incredible gesture on her part; rather than disrupting the class, she used her restless energy for something constructive.

The students and I were getting to know one another, but there were still unexpected squalls. One afternoon, a girl suddenly jumped up and grabbed the boy sitting behind her, strangling and shaking him. Soon half the class was fighting, boys against girls. It turned out that the boy had called the girl a “hootchie” on the playground that morning, and she’d stewed about it all day till she snapped. The boy told me that he thought a “hootchie” was somebody who dressed nicely.

There were times when the students actually came to my rescue. One morning, I found a note in my mailbox telling me to take the class to gym at 10:00 a.m. The children loved gym, and I reminded them (per instructions from my AP) that they’d have to behave in order to have this special gym period. We arrived at precisely 10:00 a.m. All 35 children burst joyfully into the gym, running, hollering, and playing with loose basketballs. Then a custodian told me that the gym teacher had been asked to cover another class. How could I organize my students to take them back to our room? It was like herding cats! In desperation, I approached the tallest, most intimidating girl in the class and said,

“Tiffany, I need your help.”

She looked at me, stone-faced. “What for?”

“I need you to get the girls into a line to go back to our classroom.”

Tiffany’s eyes opened wide and then narrowed. “Why are you asking me?”

“Because I think the girls look up to you.”

Tiffany moved. The girls were lined up in less than two minutes, and I had no trouble getting the boys to follow. That moment will remain with me forever as an example of what can happen when you give young people a little of the respect they deserve.

I thought that with just a little more classroom management support, I might be able to succeed. Other teachers told me that I had six of the “worst kids in the school,” and advised me to transfer them out, but the idea of taking that on defeated me. I didn’t believe in the concept of “worst kids.” There wasn’t one of my students who didn’t sometimes have a good day. I hoped to get one of the Fellows who had not passed the licensing exam on the first try to work as my

partner for a few weeks, and the AP agreed.

The crisis came on a Friday in late October, when the district superintendent was visiting with her associates. I'd just finished a writing exercise when I heard a single shout; a boy was staggering toward me with blood pouring down his face. I called security, the nurse, the assistant principal, and even the principal's office, but they were all meeting with the superintendent. Pressing a towel to the injured boy's wound, I sent him to the nurse's office with another student. Then a police officer burst into the room, identified Kabir as the attacker, handcuffed him, and marched him out like a criminal.

Kabir had brought a small rubber ball to school, and another boy had taken it from him, teased him with it, and thrown it out the window while I was occupied with other students. Enraged, Kabir jumped up and struck one blow on the back of the other boy's head. He then fell forward and cut his forehead on the edge of the desk. No brawl, no premeditation—but Kabir was taken to the police station.

The following Monday, I found a note in my box from the assistant principal saying that there was "never any learning" going on in my classroom, which was always filled with "violence" and "chaos." She said she had repeatedly tried to help me, but that I hadn't taken her direction. I was being reported, and the letter would go into my file. The Fellow who had been designated to help me was reassigned.

Our UFT representative said that I should refuse to countersign the letter, but I was too discouraged and disappointed by my own failure as a teacher to fight back. What was clear was that if I were going to continue to teach, I'd need more training and a much better understanding of the children and school culture. While I was resigning, I learned that 25% of the new Teaching Fellows had left before I did; over 500 people quit in the first two months.

The principal told me not to tell my students I was leaving. Bizarre as that seemed, I agreed. Then the assistant principal told them at lunchtime so that I would have a chance to say goodbye. The girls cried and everyone hugged me. I promised to come back for a visit at the end of term (which I did); I told them I was leaving not because they were a bad class, but because I was not a good

enough teacher for them. To my great surprise, when I went to the assistant principal to say goodbye and apologize, she gave me a referral to the high school where she had spent ten happy years teaching.

In retrospect, I realize that those who had warned me against the program were right. Like many lay people, I believed that the problem in schools resided with burned-out teachers. In reality, most of the teachers at my school were devoted professionals. They worked hard and effectively to teach all kinds of children in the face of classes that were too large and an administration that was more concerned with covering its tracks than supporting its staff. In fairness, the AP did truly try to help me. I should have insisted that the parents come to school, as she had suggested, instead of seeking to build better relations with the children first. I really did not understand the tone that children in this neighborhood expected from a teacher, and it was arrogant of me to believe that my friendly approach would succeed better than that of the experienced professionals. It must have been frustrating for my AP when I did not take her suggestions—after all, she, too, had to function in the atmosphere of suspicion that prevailed at the school. Just as teachers were not encouraged to develop a community in their classroom by trusting their students and giving them opportunities to succeed, administrative staff were not encouraged to trust teachers and work with their strengths to overcome their weaknesses—and, given the number of teachers each AP supervised, maybe that would have been impossible.

I was devastated by my failure and spent the rest of the school year deciding whether I really wanted to teach at all. I tutored and I codirected a production of Romeo and Juliet with 100 eighth graders at East Side Middle School. When I knew what I was doing, I found I had little trouble with discipline. I came to believe I could teach if I took the time to learn how to do it right. So that spring I applied to Bank Street to get the training I'd need to work in a real-world classroom.

In the end, the cost of graduate school, on top of having no income for three years, made it impossible for me to consider living on a beginning teacher's salary. (The real cost for me, including the loss of a \$40,000 salary and health insurance for three years, plus tuition and books, was nearly \$180,000!) A fantastic

job opportunity came up—producing Sesame Street in Northern Ireland and India—and I took it. The training and experience I had at Bank Street serves me daily as I work with colleagues to meet children’s and teachers’ needs, but on a personal level I am grateful to those children in the Bronx who taught me, even in failure, to respect, show humility, and persevere.

With Bank Street behind me, I know that the first year of teaching would still be very hard, but I’ve studied with master teachers in graduate courses and apprenticed with excellent teachers in their classrooms. I’ve taught for entire days on many occasions, learned to observe children’s strengths and weaknesses, and crafted curricula that I’ve seen through to completion over several weeks. No seven-week training course could offer that.

I see now that I should have been tougher with my class—not “mean,” but more definite and consistent in demanding their attention and participation. If I had already taken the social studies course at Bank Street, where we designed a thorough curriculum for students with various learning styles and levels of literacy, it would have helped me set a course that all of us—students and teacher alike—could have understood and followed. If I had read Lisa Delpit and thought about her insight into the needs of inner-city students, I might have been able to give my class both structure and encouragement. But as it was, I could not understand what my supervisors wanted from me. And I did not listen effectively because I felt inadequate as I struggled to find a way to be a teacher and myself.

The only way a Teaching Fellow model could work, in my opinion, would be if Fellows spent at least a semester, if not a year, co-teaching with a good mentor before taking on a classroom of their own. Idealistic newcomers might still improve the student-teacher ratio and bring fresh enthusiasm to schools, but they would not be expected to be in charge of a classroom until they had at least learned to speak and understand the language.

## **COLLABORATIONS FOR SUCCESS:**

## **TEACHERS, FAMILIES, AND FUNDERS WORKING TOGETHER**

### **sarah samuels**

On a difficult day in late September, as I was sitting and sobbing in my first-grade classroom in the Bronx while my students were at lunch, I could not help wondering how I had wound up taking a job that made me feel like such a failure. This was the closest I had ever come to quitting something that was important to me. Right after I graduated from college in June 2004, I joined Teach for America (TFA), a nonprofit organization that places recent college graduates with no classroom teaching experience into high-needs public schools which are difficult to staff.

Teach for America corps members commit to spending two years teaching in challenging schools. The organization maintains that our nation's greatest injustice is the educational inequality that exists in low-income communities. Disparities in educational opportunity severely limit the life prospects of the thirteen million children growing up in poverty in this country today. Teach for America believes that putting bright, committed recent college graduates into the classroom will help close the achievement gap. Teach for America participants can work toward certification while they are teaching. Thus, I was able to enroll at Bank Street College and teach in the Bronx simultaneously. My Bank Street advisor directed the working teachers program at the time and was pivotal in creating a place for Teach for America teachers at the college.

I thought I would be ahead of the game. I had spent four years helping to run Mission Hill, Harvard's largest volunteer afterschool program. This community-based program was located in Roxbury, an impoverished Boston neighborhood. My work there was by far the most challenging I undertook while at Harvard. I had seen many of the children in the program grow over the four years I was with them, and I had also seen firsthand how difficult their lives were. Some of the children I had encountered through the years were living with parents who were addicted to drugs and alcohol; others were living in situations of abuse and neglect. My work with the afterschool program solidified my deep commitment to

educational equality. I knew I could pursue my interests in education through a more traditional route by enrolling in a graduate education program. However, Teach for America appealed to me because I would be joining an organization of people who all shared my beliefs about advancing equity through education. There was a strong sense of community among the members of Teach for America, and I still feel a strong sense of kinship whenever we meet.

The summer after I graduated from college, I attended a five-week TFA institute designed to prepare me for teaching in the fall. Along with a team of three other corps members, and under the supervision of an experienced teacher, I taught a fifth-grade summer school class. When we were not with our students, we attended classes on teaching practices such as lesson planning, classroom management, and differentiating instruction for diverse learners.

Armed with my TFA training and my previous experience working with a high-needs population of students in an afterschool setting, I thought I would be prepared for my first teaching job. In truth, I believe nothing, not even a master's degree and student teaching experience, could have prepared me for this difficult task. I found myself completely overwhelmed by the poverty and hardships encountered every day by my students, first graders who were already far behind academically. That is what led to my feelings of failure and hopelessness on that day in late September when I was ready to walk out on a job where, more than anything, I had wanted to be successful.

It would not have been difficult to justify quitting; during my first year, another teacher at my school left after just a few days. The odds were stacked against me and my classroom. I quickly learned that it was one thing to be adept at working with a group of twelve students in an afterschool setting for a couple of hours with the help of other volunteers, and entirely different to be the only teacher in a classroom of twenty-five for an entire school day. I often tell people that my first year of teaching was the hardest year of my life. It was not uncommon for my class to erupt into chaos when a lesson I planned went badly. I had no idea how to organize the environment to maximize instruction and make materials accessible to my students. I was constantly moving furniture to try to set up the classroom in a way that would work for my students and keep them from

running around.

Moreover, there were many other factors in addition to my own inexperience that worked against me and the children in my class. For instance, because the school was overcrowded, my students ate lunch everyday at 10:08 a.m. As a result, our morning, which was when the students were the most focused and thus was prime instructional time, lasted just over an hour and a half. In contrast, the students would return over-excited from lunch—the only time all day they spent outside our room—for an afternoon of instruction that was over four hours long. It felt like an eternity. Our school only had one teacher each for art and gym, and my students were not assigned to either of them all year. At least once a week, I did not get my preparation period because the teacher who was supposed to take my class for writing or social studies then was instead pulled to fill other, more pressing school needs. When other first-grade teachers were absent, their students were frequently sent to other classrooms, which meant I had at least four extra students for the day.

I empathized, perhaps more than I would have liked to, with the teacher at my school who had left after only a few days. Fortunately, I did not quit; now, as I begin my fourth year of teaching, I hope to remain in the profession for many years to come. I believe I have been able to continue teaching high-needs populations because I have never tried to do the work alone. I would never be able to do it; the task is simply too hard and overwhelming for one person. Thus, I constantly seek out opportunities to work with others to make my students' experience as rich as possible. I have formed partnerships with the families of my students, sought out professional collaborations with my colleagues, and capitalized on opportunities to bring additional resources into my classroom.

### **Working with Families**

When I tell people that I teach in the Bronx, nothing makes me angrier than hearing that parents in those neighborhoods do not care about their children. That simply has not been my experience. I have found that my students come from extremely loving families who look to me for guidance about how to educate their children. I have come to believe that the single best thing I can do

for my students is to empower their families to play an active role in their education. I know I am only going to be their teacher for one year, but their families will be a part of their educational lives forever.

In my work with families in the Bronx, I try to draw upon their strengths. Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez (1992) talk about an approach to teaching that uses all that communities have to offer. Cochran-Smith (1999) comments: “teaching for social justice means drawing on family histories, traditions, and stories as well as demonstrating respect for all students’ family and cultural values” (p. 27). I try to develop relationships of mutual respect with my children’s families because I know they will be so much more likely to listen to my advice as an educator if I show that I value them as the parents and guardians of my students.

For instance, I found that part of the neighborhood culture was having parties with lots of food and dancing. I wanted to set up opportunities for families to have a positive, stress-free experience in the school. One morning, during my first year of teaching, my class performed a dance show; almost every parent attended. A few months later, I held a potluck supper where we watched the videotape of the show together. Every family brought their “famous” dish, and over 70 people participated in the festivities, including my own immediate family and my 91-year-old grandmother, who also lives in the Bronx. My students’ mothers ran the party, making sure everyone, especially my grandmother, had enough to eat. Although I had always given opportunities for parents to come and read to my class, they rarely took me up on the offer. Now I realized that the same mothers who were at ease cooking and serving food might not feel equally confident reading a story aloud to our class. In my attempt to provide a way for all families to be involved in our classroom, here was something important for me to consider as I went forward: there were many ways to include families so that they would feel comfortable.

Field trips proved to be another pressure-free way to involve my students’ families. Some teachers told me that they only brought a few parents on field trips because they felt they had to watch both the parents and the students. My view was quite the opposite; I felt that the more parents I had on the trip, the easier my job became. It was not uncommon for our class to have six or seven parent chap-

erones join us as we traveled to Madison Square Garden to watch the Knicks practice, to the Museum of Modern Art, or to Barnes & Noble. The field trips went much more smoothly with all of the extra help, and parents enjoyed coming with us. At the end of my second year of teaching I'd taken eleven field trips, and nearly every child had had a family member accompany us on one of them.

Our class parties and field trips served as a vehicle for me to build strong relationships with the families of my students. In turn, these relationships made it easier for me to guide parents in the work I wanted them to do with their children at home; parents trusted me and were eager to take my recommendations. I found that a major problem faced by families was access to and knowledge of appropriate books to read with their children. In my second year of teaching, I successfully applied for countless grants to build up our classroom library. I started sending home "just right" books at my students' independent reading levels so the children could practice reading with their families each night. It was amazing how, with their parents' help, the children's reading levels soared.

At the end of my second year of teaching, nearly all of my 25 first graders were reading at grade level. In order to learn how to read, children need numerous opportunities to practice. By sending books home, I enabled families to take an active role in teaching their children how to read. Lending "just right" books worked so well that I started another book-borrowing system. I created many different packs of five storybooks for parents to read to their children at bedtime each week. In reflecting on this, I realized that while most parents seemed to have no trouble helping their children with their "just right" books, the bedtime story packs did not seem to work as well for all families. Those books were written at a much more challenging level, and now I suspect that some parents may have struggled with reading them. When I start lending out classroom storybooks this year, I will also send home an accompanying CD so that parents can choose either to read the books to their children or listen to the CD with them.

My system of lending out books worked exceptionally well for one student, Tyshone. He was repeating first grade, and his parents were anxious for him to be ready for second grade. I knew they were reading the books I sent home with Tyshone each night. They regularly asked me questions about what he was read-

ing in school and let me know when they thought he was ready for more challenging books. By the middle of the year, Tyshone was decoding books at a second-grade level, so we switched our focus to make sure that he was also comprehending what he was reading. His parents were always eager to provide a helping hand in the classroom or on field trips and regularly sought out my advice for ways to support their son academically at home. The collaborations which I sought to build with all the families ensured that I had a great deal of help in teaching my students; their learning continued when they were at home.

### **Professional Collaborations**

Teaching can be an isolating profession. It is easy to arrive at school, close your door, and spend the day entirely with students, having little contact with adults. Henry (2005) writes, “educators often fall victim to the ‘four wall syndrome’ that prevents professional sharing and isolates educational practice” (p. 30). However, both Teach for America and Bank Street College strongly encourage collaboration among teachers. John-Steiner (2000) writes about the importance of collaboration: “an individual learns, creates, and achieves mastery in and through his or her relationships with other individuals” (p. 5). It is through such efforts that those who work together learn to push their own boundaries and take creative risks.

I was fortunate to be placed in a public school that had eight other TFA teachers. We all had the same advisor, and the organization encouraged us to form a school team, permitting us to share best practices. My collaborations with colleagues were not limited to TFA teachers; I was also eager to work with and learn from many of the more experienced teachers at my school. Although I was new, I rarely encountered any hostility from other teachers or the administration. In fact, I was fortunate to join a team of first-grade teachers who welcomed me immediately. I was invited to their daily lunches and encouraged to watch their lessons. Right from the beginning, I viewed the other teachers at my school and at Bank Street as my most treasured resources.

One such collaboration deserves special attention. Kyle Goldin was another TFA participant who taught older students at my school. He and I paired our

classes for buddy reading time. It proved to be a win-win situation. My first graders and I received the extra help we so desperately needed in our large classroom, which was not staffed with any aides or assistants. Their student buddies were able to give them something that I could not often provide: one-on-one reading attention. Over the course of the year, Kyle's students were really able to get to know my students as readers. They took pride in helping to teach their buddies, and I certainly appreciated all the additional assistance. Kyle's upper-elementary students were getting the opportunity to serve as role models to first graders who lived in their own community, and Kyle greatly appreciated the improved behavior that developed accordingly as they became mentors.

One buddy team stands out in my mind. Tatiana was a first-grade student whose mother was ill with cancer. She was bright, but she was falling far behind. In pairing up our students, we took special care to buddy Tatiana with Gigi, a nurturing and mature sixth grader. Gigi took Tatiana under her wing and often came down to our classroom during her lunch period to give Tatiana extra help with reading. Tatiana, who had been in danger of repeating first grade, improved significantly. Because of all she was able to do for Tatiana, Gigi's own self-esteem soared. She applied to and was accepted by a competitive middle and high school that was focused on sending its students to college.

In addition to the benefits that our collaboration provided for our students, Kyle and I realized many advantages from it, too. We developed a teamwork curriculum for our buddy reading program, and we wrote our lesson plans jointly. We often challenged one another to think through ways of teaching particular concepts so that our lessons would best serve the needs of our students. We were also able to reflect together on past lessons, deciding what worked well for our students and what needed to be revised. For instance, we found that our mini-lessons on teamwork were too long and were cutting into the time our students had to practice what we were teaching them. Together, we came up with ways to tighten up our lessons, keeping the parts we thought were the most essential. We wanted to make sure our students spent the bulk of their time buddy reading together, instead of listening to us.

Beyond helping me improve my teaching practices, Kyle was someone upon

whom I could always rely upon for support. Given how emotionally draining I found the work to be, this was no small thing. Most of my students lived in crowded homes with a single parent. I often wondered whether they themselves or their family members had been the victims of abuse. I cared deeply about my students, and I had a difficult time leaving my work behind at the end of the school day. I found it helpful to talk to Kyle about the things that upset me about my students' lives. We often left work together; we would get so wrapped up in conversation about our students that he would take the train to the west side with me and then walk to his apartment on the east side.

Additionally, I sought the advice of veteran teachers I knew outside of my school. For instance, I went to observe teachers at the elementary school I had attended as a child. I remembered that my sister had loved her own first-grade teacher, and when I visited her classroom nearly fifteen years later, it was easy to see why. I try to emulate the warm, gentle way she engaged her students, making them feel comfortable in the classroom. Furthermore, when I was in college, the mother of one of my fellow afterschool program volunteers was a first-grade teacher in Virginia. She had often given us educational materials to use with our students, and I called upon her again for lesson plan ideas and teaching materials to use with my first graders. Finally, Kyle and I turned to a member of the Bank Street faculty who is an expert on children's literature when we took our buddy readers on a field trip to a Barnes & Noble bookstore. We wanted our students to experience the thrill of shopping amid aisles and aisles of brand-new books. However, many of our students had never been to a bookstore before, and Kyle and I were unsure about how to prepare them for this new experience. My instructor answered many of the questions and concerns we had about preparing our students to shop for books.

I am a teacher who takes a constructivist approach to teaching and learning in my classroom. I set out to create hands-on learning experiences for my students, and I encourage them to work collaboratively with each another. Thus, it makes sense that I approach my own professional development as a teacher in much the same way; I learn by engaging with my fellow teachers and sharing ideas with them. My collaborations with my colleagues have made me a better

teacher for my students.

### **Seeking out Resources**

When I started to set up my classroom, just a couple of days before the opening of school, I could not believe how many essential items were missing. For instance, my first-grade classroom did not have a rug for the meeting area. Books were thrown haphazardly into the closets. I purchased most of the crayons, pencils, and other supplies myself. Given this situation, I knew that I would need to come up with creative ways to get extra material resources for our classroom.

I frequently used the nonprofit website Donors Choose. This site allows teachers to submit proposals for small amounts of money (usually under five hundred dollars) for classroom materials or field trips. People can visit the site, read the teachers' proposals, and select the ones they want to support. Through funded proposals on Donors Choose, I secured materials such as dinosaur math counters, ABC rug squares, and boxes and boxes of books I had selected.

I find grant writing an excellent form of advocacy. Donors Choose, in particular, is a way to spread awareness about the needs of my students. Many of my friends contributed to a proposal I posted there to provide DVDs of our class dance show for each of my students. The mother of one of the girls in my class told me that her daughter insisted on showing the DVD to everyone who visited their apartment. My own mother was the same way; everyone who visited our house was treated to a viewing of my class's performance.

Furthermore, in our second year of teaching, Kyle and I were awarded a \$2,500 Michael Jordan Fundamentals grant for our buddy reading program. Among other things, the money enabled us to purchase many books for our students and to take them on field trips around the city. For instance, when our students expressed a strong interest in art, we were able to pay the fee for our classes to visit and receive a guided tour of the Museum of Modern Art in Manhattan. In order to teach our students about the importance of exercise, we organized and paid for a field day in Central Park, complete with T-shirts that the students themselves had designed.

In addition to applying for grants, I often asked my friends and family

members to donate their old, gently used children's books to our classroom. I also made sure that friends in publishing were on the lookout for extra books lying around the office. Close friends of my parents, hearing that my children ate lunch at 10:08 a.m. and needed afternoon snacks, stocked my classroom with large bags of pretzels and boxes of crackers. As a teacher in an underserved school, I constantly look for new ways to bring material resources into the classroom.

I cannot argue that Teach for America is the perfect solution to the problems facing our nation's educational system. Ideally, the best-trained and most experienced teachers in the country would work in the nation's neediest schools. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. However, TFA does place people who are passionate about educational equality in some of the country's neediest schools, where seasoned teachers often refuse to go. The organization also encourages the beneficial practices of working collaboratively with families and other teachers and seeking out resources.

Though I have had many successes in the classroom, I have also had my fair share of difficult days, and of children whom I have been unable to teach as much as I wanted to. On those tough days, I try to remember that I am not doing this work alone. Because I know the work is so hard, I always try to remain willing and eager to accept help from others.

When I began teaching, many people, from family and friends whose opinions were important to me to perfect strangers, told me I was wasting my Harvard degree. Back then I was sometimes too timid to defend my choice. Now when people make those kinds of disparaging remarks, I never hesitate to tell them there is nothing more important that I could possibly do with my own education than teach first graders in the Bronx.

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## **GETTING OFF THE FAST TRACK FOR THE LONG HAUL:**

## **BECOMING A TEACHER**

### **ariel sacks**

When I set foot in my first classroom as a recent college graduate with emergency certification, I was not certain I wanted to be a teacher, and even less certain of what I wanted to teach. I was there because of a love for children and the sudden post-college need for a paycheck. A six-year journey and a master's degree later, I have been transformed into a committed educator. My experiences led me from a post in an urban Boys and Girls Club to a job as an alternate-route teacher in Providence, then to graduate studies at Bank Street College, and finally into a high-needs public school in New York City. As a participant in the Partnership for Quality program, I was able to work with college faculty and a cohort of teachers to implement progressive principles of education where I believe they are most urgently needed. My particular path into the profession has been marked by turning points that led me to view teaching as a lifetime endeavor, not just a stopping place on the way to some other more worthwhile destination. After four years of full-time teaching in New York City's public schools, I cannot think of a more compelling or rewarding life's work.

### **Beyond College Hill**

A few years into undergraduate life at Brown University, I decided to get a summer job off campus, away from College Hill. Courses on American slavery, immigration, and postcolonial literature, as well as a growing appreciation for hip-hop music, had sent me on a spiraling personal journey into issues of race, class, and ethnicity in America.

I found a compass for that journey and a job as the arts and crafts teacher at the Fox Point Boys and Girls Club, a community center less than a mile away from Brown. The diverse neighborhood included Cape Verdean Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrants from Portugal, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia. On the first day I made it my business to introduce myself to staff, parents, and anyone else I saw. I sat down at

a table where Diana, a forty-year-old woman, was sitting. "I'm Ariel," I said, extending my hand. "I'm the new arts and crafts teacher." I was deliberately confident, hoping to show how happy I was to be in this new environment.

"Diana," she said with a cautious but sincere smile, shaking my hand. "Nice to meet you." I sat down with the intention of making conversation while we waited for the children to arrive. "Do you have kids here?" I asked.

"Yes, I have two teenage girls, and my little niece and nephew go here too. You're from Brown?"

"Yes," I replied. Suddenly I wasn't sure what to say. Where I came from, I would have asked, "And where did you go to college?" But something stopped me from asking a question based on that assumption. Instead I said, in a less confident tone, "Did you go to college?" Diana's initial caution with me now cut through her smile.

Her reaction, both subtle and forceful, changed the course I was traveling. "No," she said flatly, and then looked away. As she did, I knew immediately that I had arrived at a critical juncture, where I had to face the naïveté that had developed as I grew up in an upper middle class suburb. I'd thought my background was common or "normal," but Diana revealed to me that in her world it was neither. While living and working in Fox Point, I began to understand what my professors were talking about when they spoke abstractly of "white privilege." I saw first hand that while I had easy access to a world of material wealth and relative safety, other Americans did not. In the world I came to know, systematic poverty, racism, and violence translated into people's daily struggles. The prevalence of unemployment, drug dealing, and incarceration were particularly startling to me.

In July 1999 I recorded in my journal these lines about children working in the art room:

The new girl and the look on her  
face as she  
told me  
Joy called her Blackie and Darkie again  
and I  
Did Not talk to her about it.

I just felt sad  
and said, The Next Thing Joy says like that will get her kicked out of the  
art room.

Joy keeps asking me  
if I have kids  
and if I did, would I  
beat them?

She told me  
All Her Brothers Died,  
Her aunt too, because she kept going to the hospital too many times.

And Kayla pulling the lanyard string tight  
around her neck, smiling, “I’m Gonna Strangle Myself so I Can  
Be With my Daddy.”

I did not ask her about her Daddy, I only  
told her never to put the lanyard like that again.

I was grasping some of the realities of racism and poverty and finding myself at a loss about how to respond. Over two and a half years, I had the opportunity to work with children between the ages of five and seventeen. While recognizing how little I knew about life in the Fox Point community, I took every opportunity to learn from the people at the Boys and Girls Club. The arts and crafts room was my main domain, but soon parents trusted me to walk their children home from the club in the evenings, and I took teenagers to the Brown computer labs for their school projects. With the guidance of a Brown University professor, I also ran a women’s poetry group. Diana and her teenage daughters, none of whom had completed high school, became members.

My time in Fox Point was more about learning than teaching. I saw myself as a friend or role model at best, but not a teacher. My professor encouraged my

work with poetry, and I found the group rewarding; still, it was not clear to me what, if anything, I had to teach.

### **Emergency Certification**

In 2001 I graduated from Brown with a degree in English and no particular plans for the future. I wanted to keep working in Fox Point, but when summer was over, the children there would be back in school. My position would become part time, no longer providing sufficient income.

Becoming a teacher was not entirely appealing to me, given my mindset at 22. My experience in a suburban public school system had been stifling, and the divide between teachers and students there devastatingly wide. Many people at Fox Point had shared negative stories about school. Some were quite damaging, and the high school dropout rate was high. I was suspicious of an education system that seemed to hurt children in so many ways and skeptical of the notion that teachers could be positive change agents.

I tried temping in an office, but that felt like a fate worse than death. And so, ambivalently, I entered teaching. In 2001 the Providence School Department granted college graduates emergency certification to fill classroom vacancies. Without so much as an interview, I was placed as a permanent substitute in an eighth-grade English class at a large middle school.

It was November, and three teachers had already quit the position I was taking. A student had apparently thrown a book at the last one, and she never came back. When a veteran teacher next door told me, “They’re all a bunch of bozos,” my intuitions about the school were confirmed: this was not a place where children felt respected by adults. Instead, teachers and students were pitted against one another. I wanted no part of such a culture, and allied myself with the students whenever I could.

Though my students liked me, I knew almost nothing about teaching. I completely ignored the curriculum guides left on my desk by the last teacher and began experimenting, with some successes (like poetry) and frequent flops (like the five-paragraph essay). I also broke a lot of school rules, often without realizing it. One day, a student said to me, “Ms. Sacks, the other teachers are talking about

you, because you don't line us up and walk us to lunch." No one had told me to walk the students to lunch. Furthermore, it seemed a ridiculous demand. My students were practically grown! Two of them were pregnant. Couldn't they find the lunch room by themselves?

By February the students began to pressure me to follow more rules because they feared I might get fired. I realize now that I should have been able to see that the students were truly trying to keep me on track so that I could stay with them. I naively dismissed their warnings, since I had heard nothing from any adult. I also believed I was untouchable—that the school would never let me go, since it had been so difficult to fill the position in the first place. Besides, I was just beginning to gain some momentum in my teaching. I spent my entire February vacation planning a unit on persuasive writing. Monday morning, excited to go back to work, I got a call from downtown. I'd reached another turning point. "Ariel Sacks, you're at Hope High School today," the woman's voice said. It took me a few minutes to remember that I was still technically a substitute. I was stunned as I heard the voice tell me that I was being transferred. The woman on the other end of the phone had no knowledge of my circumstance, but suggested I speak with the principal.

Until that moment, the principal had not said more than two words to me. Now, to my bewilderment, she was furious. She accused me of not taking the job seriously. In fairness to her, there was some truth to her complaint. Though I took my students seriously, I had little respect for the school and had not attempted to conceal my attitude. The principal told me that she had no intention of taking me back. I later heard from my students that they wrote letters asking that I return. She told them that I had quit.

Although I spent the remainder of the year as a substitute in various secondary schools, that phone call had summoned me to turn toward a deeper understanding of my circumstances and my role in them. As I went through the motions of substituting during the following months, I observed students in many different environments and had a lot of time to reflect. One day, in a middle school classroom, I was pleasantly shocked when students entered the room, took out notebooks, and began working as if I were their regular teacher. They asked

for help when they needed it, but appeared to be self-motivated. Who was their teacher, and what had she done to create this climate? In the hum of this phantom teacher's classroom, I admitted to myself for the first time that I had failed—failed to take the job of teaching seriously; and thus, I had failed my students.

### **Full-time Study**

I decided to leave the country in order to learn Spanish and went to live in Mexico for a year. I took a TEFL course, traveled, and taught English. But before I left, partly at the behest of my parents, I applied to graduate schools of education in New York City. The result of my tumultuous year in Providence Public Schools and final months of introspection was that I could not think of any profession more compelling than teaching, though I knew it was not an easy or simple job. I knew that if I were to take on classroom teaching in an urban public school again, I would need to do it much more seriously, and with guidance from experts. I remembered Diana and her daughters, and the eighth graders I'd been forced to leave, and knew I couldn't afford the emotional cost of failing my students again.

I chose Bank Street because of its size and history of progressive work. Although it was highly recommended by family and friends, I doubted that its approach would be geared to public education. At the same time, I was confident that my interests would be taken seriously in a small learning community.

My advisor, Madeleine Ray, turned out to be a true expert. She ran my weekly conference group, supervised my student teaching, and taught curriculum courses. She had also worked with struggling students in Harlem's public schools for many years. She struck me as a free spirit who possessed an unflinching belief in the capabilities of children.

The weekly conference group was the backbone of that first year at Bank Street. We were five young women, each bringing our perspectives from the field to open-ended two-hour-long discussions every week. I was the only one of us, however, who had spent time in urban public schools, and who was sure I wanted to teach in one. My reasons were simple. I had left the children of Fox Point and the Providence Middle School behind physically, but not in spirit. I had been

touched by their stories, sensibilities, and resiliency, and was equally shaken by the prospect that most of them would not receive the quality education they needed and deserved. I wanted to provide opportunities for children in similar situations and contribute to a better vision of public education.

My first student teaching experience was not in a public school, however. Madeleine asked me to try a placement in a middle school classroom at Bank Street's School for Children, promising a public school placement in the spring. "This experience will cut years off your practice," she said.

The classroom at the School for Children had wooden tables arranged in a circle, large tall windows along one wall, a sink with art supplies neatly organized above it, and two computers. On one wall there was a chart with seventeen Greek gods and goddesses, each matched with a student's name. Later I learned that the Greek deities represented rotating classroom jobs; Zeus, for example, led morning meeting, and Hermes delivered messages. The halls were quiet, except when students used them as work space—for example, when they made life-size cardboard puppets of Greek gods and goddesses. The staircases on each floor displayed student murals that depicted themes from social studies—woodland Indian villages and scenes and quotes from African American history. There were also fliers for "Kids of Color" meetings and announcements of developmental talks for parents given by the school psychologist. It was unlike any middle school I had seen as a child or in Providence. Everything appeared to be carefully thought out.

The first semester of fieldwork was about learning teaching strategies. My cooperating teacher allowed me to come up with the idea for my first lesson. The students were involved in a study of the Ancient Greeks. I wanted them to know something about the other civilizations in the region that contributed to the Greeks' achievements. I found that there were at least six civilizations that had made important contributions, such as iron tools and the alphabet, to Greek culture. I was struggling to figure out how to share this information with students in an interesting way.

I brought the idea to my conference group session. Someone suggested dividing the work among groups of students and asking each to present its research to the class. Another member suggested the students create a timeline of

each of the six civilizations. Madeleine encouraged me to plan in detail how I would give directions and materials and to set a time frame for each step. Using the suggestions from the conference group, I worked late into the night on the logistics of this endeavor. Though I went over the allotted time, the lesson was clearly a success.

The School for Children was not an ideal place for me, given the turns I'd taken in my life. It served a mostly privileged group of students, and I knew my path led elsewhere. However, it provided a much-needed model of developmentally appropriate progressive education and a chance to try my hand at it. After that, it was easier to imagine how the principles of progressive pedagogy might work in a public school. It seemed to me that children growing up in poverty needed an education that not only provided them with basic academic skills, but also gave them opportunities to imagine and create a world in which they would want to live. Critical thinking and creativity were necessary components of a sound curriculum.

In the spring, everyone in my conference group moved to public school placements. I was with a veteran fifth-grade teacher at Amistad, a dual language public school that was started by a former Bank Street faculty member. Half of the classes there were taught in English, and half were conducted in Spanish; all the teachers were bilingual, the student population predominantly Latino. The environment was especially welcoming to parents. Some helped out in the classroom a few days each week. There was tension at the school around curriculum, because state and district mandates often conflicted with the project-based, responsive classrooms the staff wanted to maintain. Teachers discussed this at length during lunch, and a parent group was complaining to the district about the mandates. The cooperating teacher welcomed my ideas and provided a stable, warm classroom environment in which I could hone my teaching skills.

Against the background of these first two experiences, I was able to look at my final placement through a new lens. I worked with a less experienced teacher in a small public school that served African-American and Latino students. The staff was well intentioned, but the school lacked structures that would help students stay engaged academically. Most of us in conference groups were witnessing

and dealing with issues of classroom management. My coursework stressed the importance of getting to know individual students as well as understanding the general characteristics of their age group. Madeleine advocated implementing exciting curricula, clear parameters and expectations, and open and honest communication with the students about the life of the classroom. I realized that it would take years for me to have a smoothly functioning classroom like those at Amistad or the School for Children. Training and support from seasoned professionals would be indispensable along the way, but I knew that no one could walk my path for me; nothing could take the place of hands-on experience.

### **Partnership For Quality**

At the end of a year of student teaching and full-time study, everyone in my conference group found teaching jobs. Three out of five of us opted to teach in private schools. I obtained an internship certification and took a position in the Rafael Cordero Bilingual Academy at Middle School 45 in East Harlem. The school was part of the Partnership for Quality, a new collaboration between Bank Street College and a cluster of high-needs schools in Region 9. The school was eager to hire its first Bank Street-trained teacher, and I was eager to have a second chance at teaching in my own classroom—this time with more knowledge, an explicit set of guiding principles, and support from other professionals.

While the school itself was not an easy place to work—new teachers generally received little support—I had a few advantages that many others in similar positions did not.

(1) My experiences in Providence had given me a window into the lives of students living in urban poverty and prepared me for the rough edges I would encounter in high-needs urban public schools in a way no teacher preparation program ever could.

(2) My continued course work at Bank Street provided useful techniques and perspectives that kept me connected to the student-centered, inquiry-based pedagogy I believed in.

(3) Through the Partnership, I was able to continue working with Madeleine. Her mentorship was invaluable. In particular, when she observed my teaching she

helped me to see the things that were actually working and how I could take them further. It was easy, as a new teacher, to blame myself for my shortcomings. The more difficult task was to determine where the successes were and how to build on them.

(4) The Partnership provided professional development by a Bank Street faculty member to a cohort of teachers in my school. These sessions focused on adolescent development and connecting curriculum across disciplines. I often felt isolated, as my ideas about success in the classroom and how to create it frequently conflicted with those of other staff members. Over time, the Partnership helped my colleagues and me develop common ground.

Bank Street's presence at the school also provided some leverage for me with the administration concerning curriculum. I felt comfortable trying out new ideas in my classroom, though I always had to be ready to defend my practices. At the same time, I was also more willing to compromise than I had been as a 22-year-old in Providence. I learned to pick my battles. I even came to understand the value of lining my eighth graders up and walking them to lunch. After observing a variety of schools as a student teacher, I could see that adolescents needed structure and order in their lives, and that these could be implemented respectfully and successfully.

I taught at M.S. 45 for three years, and have seen many young teachers leave the profession. However, the support I received there enabled me to become a career teacher. I may never find a perfect school, and I'm still learning how to teach, but I see now that there is no end to this winding course. Each turn presents endless possibilities.

## **LEARNING A TOUGH LESSON:**

## MY LIFE AS A NYC TEACHING FELLOW

**allen ellenzweig**

Early in 2005, I applied for a place in the New York City Teaching Fellows program (NYCTF). I had recently been unceremoniously downsized after working as an administrator at New York University for seventeen years.

I had always wanted to teach. In 1999-2000, while still at NYU, I was an adjunct at Rutgers University teaching expository writing to entering freshmen. Now, having difficulty finding full-time work, with no immediate prospects, and the suspicion that I was at a disadvantage on the job market because of my advanced age (I was 54 at the time), I decided to pursue teaching in the New York public school system.

I did not take this step out of great idealism for advancing social justice or educational reform. A native New Yorker, I attended the city's public schools when tracking was common practice. After high school, I spent a year at Hunter College in the city-sponsored CUNY system, followed by four years at Cooper Union, the only private college in the United States to offer a tuition-free undergraduate degree.

In short, I owed my entire education to the City of New York and to a remarkable visionary, the nineteenth-century industrialist and inventor, Peter Cooper. As a Teaching Fellow, I had to make a two-year commitment to teaching in the public schools while studying for certification, and I saw that as a fair trade for the free education I'd received. Teaching at a "high-needs school" was the price I would pay to get another master's degree (I already had an MFA in dramatic writing from NYU) at essentially no other cost.

Later, when I began jumping through hoops to complete all the paperwork needed to enter the NYCTF, I did not imagine that I would stay in the city's schools much beyond the first two years. I planned to move on to a private school setting, or to a public school system outside of New York City.

I made those first tentative steps toward enrollment in the NYCTF program with few illusions. I might be accepted. I might not. If I became a Teaching

Fellow, I would do my best to get a placement in a conveniently located school whose atmosphere was not wildly oppressive. I did not want to be reduced to policing teenagers. And while I would not announce that I was gay, I wouldn't hide it, either. That was just another issue to deal with as I navigated through a system I'd always heard to be incredibly bureaucratic.

I lived with the memory of the Board of Education's ugly decentralization battles of the mid-1960s, when charges of racism and anti-Semitism tainted an increasingly polarized system, one where parents, teachers, and administrators often stood at opposing sides of the barricades instead of making common cause. I was determined not to let my status as a gay man or a Jew interfere with my desire to stand up in front of a high school class, presumably composed largely of students of color, and impart to them something as simple, and perhaps as naïve, as this: the English language is yours for the taking. Master it and it can give you opportunities that you never knew existed. Let me help you.

To ensure my candidacy, I had to pass qualifying exams, the LAST (Liberal Arts and Sciences Test) and the English CST (Content Specialty Test). I hadn't taken such tests since my SATs. Suddenly, I was a teenager again, reviewing basics of cross-disciplinary knowledge as well as the rules of English grammar and the nomenclature of English poetic forms from couplets to quatrains. I had always disdained multiple-choice tests as superficial gauges of aptitude, yet there I was, practicing conceptual logic problems, relearning the uses of the Venn Diagram, and gearing myself up for multiplication or long division with decimals.

While I awaited the official results, along with the others who hoped to become Teaching Fellows—most of them younger than me, including people of color, and first-generation immigrants from the former Soviet bloc—the process moved forward. There was a spring school visit with a current Teaching Fellow. An attractive young Latina in a crowded and shabby modern high school on the Upper West Side, she seemed relatively composed in front of her young charges, despite what appeared the apparently barely organized chaos of her classroom and the mixed indifference of her students. She assured my companion NYCTF applicant, Adrienne<sup>1</sup>, an astute woman in her thirties with a background in law enforcement who later became my dearest colleague in the program, that she

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper, both for individuals and for the school where I worked as a Teaching Fellow.

could count on male students making passes at her. Oh. Charming.

By May 2005, I found myself in full placement mode: Fellows are charged with finding their own school within an assigned region of the system. The several visits I paid to schools in Washington Heights, Inwood, and central Harlem provoked a certain low-level dread. As I walked their echoing corridors and heard the booming voices of students bouncing off the walls, my impression of the vast institutional impersonality of the massive NYC education system was reinforced. I had a sense that everyone—students, teachers, and administrators alike—was working under siege and the scrutiny of imposed standards, locked in the chilling embrace of organizations with limited resources and crowded, outdated physical plants.

At my first appointment, I was kept waiting at least an hour. When I finally had my interview, after sitting near a small group of frazzled-looking teachers eating their bag lunches over lively chatter in a cluttered teachers' lounge, I became irrationally dispirited. It looked like a professional world of small joys and chronic fatigue.

So I felt lucky to be called, without having even applied for it, to interview for a position at Harlem High (HH), a middle and high school in central Harlem known for its successful graduation rate. The principal held a group meeting with candidates around a table. This created camaraderie among competitors as well as a desire to stand out in the crowd. The principal seemed as interested in the extra-curricular skills we might bring to his school as with our subject areas and proven expertise. My friend Adrienne, who had also been invited to interview, played lacrosse, which the principal saw as a good new sport for his young female students; he instantly proposed that she coach a women's lacrosse team. I am fluent in French, and I was immediately enlisted as a prospective French teacher—although, in fact, officially my content area was English.

Compared with other schools, Harlem High looked impressive. There was a selective admissions process and a student dress code. Personal comportment in classrooms and corridors was scrutinized; HH had a non-negotiable series of behavioral rules. The lively hallways evidenced student achievement: pictures of class trips abroad, lists of college placements, samplings of student art work, and

postings of exemplary student writing assignments.

The principal tentatively offered me a position teaching English and French, but first, as was standard procedure, he required that I give a sample class in both subjects. My demos went well enough, despite one observer's criticism of the English class (for which I had students read a short story in advance): I hadn't written a full lesson plan on the board. Ah, yes: the Lesson Plan. The "Do Now." More on that later.

We were given intense teaching preparation during the summer immediately prior to my fall assignment at Harlem High. The NYCTF program required a one-month field placement of supervised teaching. Since I was already assigned to HH for fall 2005, the principal allowed me, along with several other Fellows, to fulfill the mandated fieldwork there. This entailed classroom observation as well as teaching, even as we Fellows took daily master's-level courses at colleges throughout the city. Adrienne and I were attached to the Graduate School of Education at Fordham's Lincoln Center campus.

My field assignment gave me some early storm warnings, but I was determined to avoid pre-judgment. For several days I observed two seasoned veterans teaching, and then I stood up before a class and conducted English language skills exercises myself, under the watchful eye of Ms. Akiba—who was also, as it happened, to supervise my French classes in the fall. Ms. Akiba was a worldly, well-educated émigré who spoke beautiful French and lightly accented English. She conducted classes in rigidly organized blocs of time. Her detailed lesson plans were chalked on the blackboard so that her students could see—if they bothered to read it—where that day's class was headed. Her English skills classes were for eighth graders from around the city who were slated to enter Harlem High's middle school.

These summer students were relatively easy to manage. They were unaccustomed to HH's culture and not allied to existing student cliques. Some were cowed by their new surroundings or timid in the face of new peers; only a few distinguished themselves right away. To be sure, some of them didn't work hard and some were disruptive, but as I looked at them I was freshly aware that they were at the age when hormones rage and individual personality emerges. Lessons were

divided by workbook exercises that aimed to clarify essential narrative elements such as cause and effect, sequencing, and setting. The workbook contained mostly multiple-choice questions following each reading and allowed for classroom quizzes and reviews.

I chafed a bit under Ms. Akiba's plodding routine, although I admired her command of the classroom using a regimented management style that ran counter to the one I was being taught at Fordham. Although relatively soft-spoken, Ms. Akiba had no problem challenging students who hadn't completed homework, arrived late, engaged in private communications, or otherwise wasted her time. She exhibited a resolve that simply said, "I mean business," and she never negotiated bad behavior in front of other students. Sturdy, athletic black boys in their early teens withered under her direct gaze.

In this, she marginally resembled another teacher I observed that summer, an African-American man, probably just over thirty, who laid down the law hard and consistently. Unlike Ms. Akiba, who taught her newcomers grammar as well as HH's renowned creed of honor and discipline, Mr. Blaine had older students who had failed the state Regents exam and, consequently, his course. They were repeating a subject, some for the second time.

Mr. Blaine held forth in a theatrical style and with a quick temper, fixed in his determination that the spotlight shine only on him. He would routinely criticize bad behavior, embarrass chronic gum-chewers, and mock those who mumbled or responded slowly—all while working incredibly hard, covering quantities of American history at great speed. More than Ms. Akiba had, he held to stringent standards of classroom comportment by using fear to enforce his rules; he also wasn't averse to shaming students in ways that I am convinced no white teacher ever could without fear of being accused of racism.

On occasion, Mr. Blaine gave me a damning inside scoop on HH's administration, describing the school as a place where loyalty to the principal was the one sure way to guarantee his support in a dispute with a student or parent as well as the occasional faculty perk. Nor was Mr. Blaine beneath saying to me, in a loud, bogus stage whisper while his students were engaged in their "Do Now," that the reputation of HH's student body was undeserved—as I could see, couldn't

I?—and referring to his present class as laggards. This shocked me more than his calling individuals to account; it conveyed his essential condescension to any students within hearing, also showing them that he dared share his attitude with me, an unknown white observer.

If Ms. Akiba was decorous in her criticism, Mr. Blaine was blatant. Yet in time I learned that Mr. Blaine also seemed committed to his students. He communicated with their parents by phone during the first week of school, after the third week, and once a month thereafter. He remarked that parents were sometimes not especially receptive. He used his first phone call of the semester merely as an introduction; his second, he said, was to let parents know “what I’ve noticed.” For her part, Ms. Akiba told me that parents could be quite rude. She sometimes felt that they did not support her attempt to maintain high standards for their children. Her black skin did not shield her from parental pique.

So in counterpoint to my textbooks, the examples of Ms. Akiba and Mr. Blaine persuaded me not to engage in negotiations with students. While I might hope to entertain my class, I should not hesitate to establish firm rules and ease them only after I had earned my students’ respect and cooperation. I could see myself as a benevolent despot like Mr. Blaine, or even a resolute disciplinarian like Ms. Akiba. Yet I could not imagine what it was going to be like to stand in front of five classes every day and keep my mental balance if, alas, my full energies had to be devoted to maintaining the attention of street-wise students whose greatest achievement might be watching me fail.

While I observed two seasoned professionals that summer, I also attended education classes at Fordham Lincoln Center with a cohort of Fellows, many fresh from college. We were all training to teach English at the middle or high school level. We were chronic complainers, although we had good reason: we were juggling field work with exhausting amounts of reading and writing. That left us little, if any, leisure time.

We traveled in two distinct groups between our summer classes and the group advisement sessions that were intended to prepare us for the realities of teaching. During those meetings, a practicing public school teacher helped us anticipate the kinds of classroom management challenges we would face. This

advisement component also had required readings, with supplementary video viewings on classroom paradigms and problems. All the work left us weary, but occasionally exhilarated by an infectious spirit of collegiality, like shipwrecked sailors who sight land only to have it disappear into the vapor of a mirage. While we harbored great affection for our advisement leader—an openly gay African-American man who constantly shared homespun dicta based on hard-won battles—many of his assignments felt like a return to grade school. It did not escape our notice that he taught elementary grades although we, as a body, would be working in middle and high schools.

During that summer, we privately questioned the various theoretical models rooted in the utopian ideal of the differentiated classroom that we encountered in our texts. The old tracking model—in which students of similar intelligence were placed in homogeneous classes so that the slower ones didn’t impede the more advanced—was giving way to integrating students of mixed abilities and skills, forcing teachers to find creative ways to address a heterogeneous group. Furthermore, in response to changes in social custom and law, students with a wide range of disabilities were being mainstreamed into public school systems.

It seemed to some of us as if an inordinate burden was being placed on teachers, requiring them to be all things to all students. Several of the people I knew outside of the educational system were totally skeptical of a process that was fast-tracking novice teachers into high-needs schools when it seemed logical that, instead, those with the greatest teaching experience should be persuaded by economic incentives to take on demanding students in the most challenging environments.

The summer became especially fraught as we moved deeper into August and Harlem High still had not given Adrienne, me, or any other Fellows our fixed teaching assignments for the fall. Of verbal assurances we had plenty. The irony of our situation was patent. Even as we learned to structure lesson plans in our Fordham classes, and to adhere to New York State standards for each grade level, we HH novices didn’t even know which grade we would be teaching.

And that would make all the difference. The ninth-, tenth-, and eleventh-grade summer reading lists were all different. Like my students, I also had to read

the books on the summer list. (For ninth grade, amazingly, this included Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, whose narrative frame and rarefied language would be challenging even for a 14-year-old from Bloomsbury, England!)

Indeed, our courses on classroom management and teaching methods stressed preparedness, especially in that crucial first year when everything is new for the beginning teacher. Success in the classroom, we were constantly reminded, depended in large measure on establishing solid routines so that students would know what to expect. They should enter a classroom knowing that they must be prepared to work, with their immediate "Do Now" assignment on the board in front of them. Then, while they took out their papers and pens, the teacher could take care of attendance and other administrative chores, or deal with individual student problems. And of course, we were told that our classrooms should be physically organized in ways congruent with our needs and those of our students. We might group desks in blocs so that students could work in pods of four, or create a large semi-circle with aisles that allowed easy access to all students as we walked around to observe them while they did in-class assignments. We needed to establish a library or other quiet work area. Walls should be covered with such displays as exhortations "to be all that you can be," quotations from African-American writers, the list of HH's rules of behavior, and pictures of great literary figures.

Yet we were only days away from the start of the fall semester, and our pleading to be given our permanent assignments went unanswered. For me, and for others who also were scheduled to take on two subject areas, this refusal to acknowledge our dilemma was especially maddening. Already, I began to see that my commitment to teach French as well as English was a mistake. How would I ever manage to devise daily lesson plans in two subjects if I barely had experience doing so for one? And how was I to prepare lessons for the first couple of weeks if just days away from the start of the semester I still didn't know which grade I was going to teach?

Anxiety and panic ran rampant through the ranks of the new Fellows at Harlem High. Among us, the talk was of nothing but "have you found out what grade you're going to teach? Have you been given a room assignment?" It was as

though we were being taught two simultaneous (and very different) lessons: the theoretical one where, in a perfect world, the new teacher is given ample time to plan lessons and decorate a classroom; and the real-world one, where the new teacher is trapped, waiting around in a system whose processes and rationales are opaque, knowing that marching orders, when given, will require moving at double-time pace. The school year was about to begin, and we had been given neither our classroom nor our grade assignments. Amazingly, neither had any of HH's teachers—but the veterans were used to it. They could rely upon lessons and curricula from many previous years of teaching.

By the time our assignments came through, a mere day or two before classes started, Adrienne and I had given ourselves up to the fates, as if we'd been set up to fail and would do so in a blaze of glory. We shopped together at a supply store near the old Board of Education office on Livingston Street in Brooklyn, gathering those essential instructional items teachers pay for out-of-pocket, like water-soluble marking pens for whiteboards, attractive posters in our subject areas, and boxes of dust-free colored chalk for blackboards.

But as it turned out, I wouldn't even have a room to call my own; my two French classes were held in different rooms, each of which was to be shared with at least one other teacher. Another new Fellow took pity on me and offered me a closet in the classroom we shared; it was a long cupboard with a single high shelf, so my papers and materials were stacked helter-skelter on its floor. As the days progressed, these papers included dated lesson plans, quizzes, and exams, all amid the boxed rubble of my personal supplies.

The days advanced at a mad pace. From the start, I was playing catch-up. I missed the first of my two French classes during the chaotic opening day when an auditorium full of new students awaiting class assignments required supervision. Consequently, I was continually a lesson plan behind in that class during that first harried week, when as much time was spent discussing rules as actually getting around to content.

Despite the safety net that NYCTF intended to provide by assigning all Fellows NYCTF advisors (each of whom had a cohort of new Fellows to consult with on a rotating basis), the well-intentioned young woman with whom I spoke

on several occasions was powerless to spur the HH administration into action. She could commiserate with me about my not having yet been assigned classes in my official subject area, English, but she was hardly prepared to do battle with a principal and assistant principal whose formidable reputations were well established.

While awaiting my English class assignments, I had my first experience of standing before two classes of African-American and Latino youngsters to teach French, a language that, on the face of it, might not have seemed likely to draw their interest. As I had been taught to do at Fordham, I sent a letter of introduction home to their parents and guardians. I hoped to persuade them that knowing French, widely spoken throughout the world and particularly in Africa, is a marketable skill in the United States and abroad. I also wrote that developing proficiency in French would give their child a sense of accomplishment that would reinforce self-esteem and make him or her ready to tackle other school challenges. Addressing these letters to parents and guardians personally and letting them know that I was available to meet with them was supposed to assure them that they were regarded as partners in their children's education.

The classroom was another situation. The initial control I had over my two French classes began to crumble. Preparing lessons that allowed students not merely to memorize words and parrot me, but to get on their feet and discover real-life usage with their classmates, taxed my powers of imagination. And each class had a few students with behavior problems. They usurped class time, undermined my confidence, and obstructed progress. This was to be expected; I was a novice and had been warned—both at Fordham and by Harlem High's own administration—that students can sense an inexperienced teacher's fear and will try to take advantage of it.

What made it worse was that my morning class followed immediately on the heels of a Spanish period, so I had to post my day's lesson plan in the short interval between the end of the previous class and the beginning of mine. Again, my Spanish-teaching colleague—a cheery extroverted Englishman—found a partial solution: I could write most of my lesson plan on the backs of the freestanding wheeled boards on either side of the room and then merely have to swing the boards around when I entered the class. This still left much of each plan to be

hastily scrawled on the permanent center blackboard while my students watched me racing to complete the task. The “Do Now” might always be in their sight, but as my own attention was elsewhere, they could dawdle, dally, and chatter with impunity until I turned to face them.

Abruptly, about two weeks into the semester, I was assigned yet a third elementary French class. There I was, waiting to be assigned my English classes, but instead undergoing a thorough immersion in teaching French! This new task made me feel even more overwhelmed: another group of students whose names I needed to memorize; another class whose lessons fell behind the other two; another class to whom I had to introduce my classroom rules after they had already gotten used to someone else’s. The feeling of things spiraling out of control intensified because I worked from a French textbook that (to prevent theft) my students were not allowed to take home. So I had to photocopy pages from the book in a harried teacher’s queue before the start of morning classes and then distribute them as needed later in the day.

By now, I also started calling parents and guardians with whose children I was having difficulties. One student fell asleep sitting up, another was constantly engaged in minor disputes, and one was forever chatting with her best friend. An atmosphere of unpreparedness pervaded. I never yelled in class, but I learned to impose myself by proximity. I stared students down, getting into their space, and moved those who misbehaved to new seats. And once I stood at the front of the room in silence, my face frozen in dismay, until they all noticed that I was waiting for their attention. Three weeks into the semester I had them write a paper on why we can’t learn if the class rules aren’t followed. In English.

Then, out of the blue, near the end of the third week, I was assigned two English classes. My third French class was taken back. I should have been delighted, but instead I felt shell-shocked. Now I really had two subjects to teach, two lesson plans to write. I would run between classrooms to chalk the “Do Now” before the students were at my back; I would rummage through my increasingly disorganized closet. My attendance records were becoming a shambles as I neglected to do a proper accounting in my haste to get classes underway.

In the week that followed, I never had a final roster of the students in one

of my two English classes. On one day I counted an astounding 32 people in a room set up for 25. Every day, new students appeared and others failed to show up. They were a raucous lot, many more boys than girls, and nests of mischief-makers settled in at the back rows. Taking attendance felt like mere folly. I was at my wits' end, decidedly sleep deprived not only because I was not yet used to awakening at 6:00 a.m., but also due to worry and anxiety. In the final 10 days I could think of nothing but quitting. My Fordham advisor, like the HH principal, counseled me against doing anything rash, which only postponed the agony another week.

I was gone by October 1st. By then I felt that I was doing the only thing I could to save my equilibrium. I left wondering how it was that teachers were paid so little for doing such heroic work. But I was glad not to be among them anymore.

## **AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES**

*MIRANDA BARRY* is Senior Creative Director at Sesame Workshop, where she oversees content development for *Sesame Street* around the world. Previously, she produced *Ghostwriter* and *Sesame Street* coproductions in India and Northern Ireland. Prior to being at Sesame Workshop, Barry developed *The Famous Jett Jackson* for Disney Channel and worked on series for Yahoo, Fox Kids, Disney, and PBS. At Zing Systems, she helped develop cable systems to encode programs for interactive television. Earlier, she was Director of Program Development for PBS's landmark drama series, *American Playhouse*. Miranda graduated from Bank Street College of Education in 2006.

*ALLEN ELLENZWEIG* is the author of *The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1992) and has been writing fiction for the last decade. He has published as an art and photography critic, cultural journalist, and commentator in such periodicals as *Art in America*, *The Village Voice*, and *Response: A Contemporary Jewish Review*. Currently, he is a contributing writer to *The Gay & Lesbian Review/Worldwide*, where he publishes theater and book criticism. He also teaches expository writing at Rutgers University. He is President of the Board of the Robert Giard Foundation.

*ARIEL SACKS* graduated from Bank Street College's Middle School General Education program in 2006, committed to implementing progressive pedagogy in high-needs public schools. She taught English at Middle School 45 in East Harlem for three years through Bank Street's Partnership for Quality. In her fourth year as a middle school educator, she teaches eighth-grade English and serves as a team leader at the School For Democracy and Leadership in Brooklyn. She is a member of the national Teacher Leaders Network and has published articles about her work.

*SARAH LESLIE SAMUELS* is a first-grade teacher at P.S. 156X in the Bronx, a

school collaborating with Bank Street College through the Partnership for Quality program. She graduated *cum laude* from Harvard University and received her master's degree at Bank Street College of Education. She previously taught first grade at P.S. 126X in the Bronx through Teach for America..

*JON SNYDER* is currently Dean of the Graduate School of Education at Bank Street College. He has worked as a researcher and a teacher educator at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Teachers College Columbia University; the National Center for the Restructuring of Education, Schools, and Teaching; and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. He remains engaged in researching teacher learning, conditions that support teacher learning, and the relationships between teacher and student learning. His current position allows him the opportunity to explore these issues with his colleagues in the context of an exemplary stand-alone professional school of education.



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